

## Study Abroad Alumni Discuss NSLI-Y Program

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Narrator:

The National Security Language Initiative for Youth, called NSLI-Y, promotes language learning as one of the most important ways that young Americans can create understanding between cultures. And cultural understanding helps the United States and other countries work together to solve shared problems.

For anyone considering applying for the full year, semester, or summer NSLI-Y programs, there's nothing as valuable as listening to those students who were just in the program themselves.

Today, recent participants in the NSLI-Y summer program help us answer some of these questions and how best to approach studying abroad. They give us their thoughts and stories about their reasons for applying to the program, how they prepared, the first day in their country, their experiences with local culture, and what it's like to come back home.

We think you'll find that these students, now veterans of a summer study-abroad program, were just like you.

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Narrator:

What are some of the benefits of committing to a summer, a semester, or a year of language study abroad? That's the most basic question all students ask themselves when deciding to apply for the NSLI-Y program. Every student has different reasons for going. Studying a language overseas improves your language learning, your academic skills and opportunities, and can really transform your life. Also, overseas cultural experience enhances your college application. Universities and colleges generally rank bilingual and culturally experienced students higher for admissions.

Margaret Mullins:

I was one of the first twelve to Egypt in 2006.

Narrator:

That's Margaret Mullins, from Atlanta, Georgia. She was part of the first group of NSLI-Y program participants.

Margaret Mullins:

When I was in high school I was fortunate enough to take an elective class and kind of got hooked on the idea of studying on the Middle East. And I knew that's what I wanted to study and at that point I had already accepted to go to Georgetown and the School of Foreign Service and the idea of going to Egypt was totally different than anything else I had ever considered or experienced.

Matt Thorp:

I'm Matt Thorp from Maryland, around Annapolis.

Narrator:

Matt found out about the NSLI-Y program from his Russian teacher. He went to Kazan in Russia.

Matt Thorp:

I mean, it's just such a great opportunity, like all the doors that it can open. Giving up your summer is just like a choice and I think I chose wisely. First, it's free, which was really nice, and you just get to meet so many different people from around the world that, I mean I didn't know what Russia would be like. We were hearing so many rumors that turned out not to be true, but it was just different.

Narrator:

NSLI-Y offers full year and semester programs for language learning in a foreign country. But it also offers a summer program which many students find is a good fit for them. Although not as long, a summer program of six weeks still provides students with many opportunities for exposure to language and culture.

Matt Petty:

I'm Matthew Petty, I'm from El Paso, Texas. I've always been interested in languages, history, cultures as well. I've always wanted to go on an exchange program. Because of work with school and life I haven't been able to in high school, during the year, and so this is the perfect opportunity because it allowed for a summer program as well. And it was a full scholarship so that really helped.

Narrator:

Beyond the practical reasons for studying foreign language overseas, many students find that the sense of adventure and discovery is really the most exciting part of program. Many students find they grow personally, emotionally, and gain a greater sense of confidence and independence as a result of undertaking the challenge of living overseas. Corinne Hoogakker is from Richmond, Virginia. She went to Tajikistan to study Tajik, a Persian language.

Corinne Hoogakker:

Why Tajikistan is the question that everybody asks. I don't have a really good answer for that and I don't think a lot of us do. Because I wanted something completely different. I think the fact that it was something completely crazy, that you don't even know where it is, you don't know anything about it and going there was the most amazing experience. I feel like nobody knows about Central Asia. Nobody knows about Central Asia at all and going there kind of showed me a whole area of the world that I don't think most of us even think exists, really.

Tim Hampshire:

My name's Tim Hampshire, I'm from South Jersey. It was actually my first time out of the United States.

Narrator:

NSLI-Y program participants come from all over the United States and have different backgrounds. Some have traveled and studied foreign language before. Many others have done neither. For all students, the question of how to prepare for their overseas stay is obviously important. Tim Hampshire studied in China.

Tim Hampshire:

I had just taken instructional language classes, but I had no idea what it was going to be like to live in China. Now that I'm back from China, I'm of the opinion that you really can't take any kind of culture class in what it's actually like to live in China. It's just so drastically different from a lot of the stuff that you experience here that you have to actually go there. But I did take among my instructional courses, we had like a current events class, like a history class and what not.

Matt Petty:

I found out the 17th of February. That was when they let us know where I would be going in Russia, Gatchina, then we left the 25th of June. I was a beginner. American Councils gave all of us several resources through the internet and suggested books that we purchase. So I learned the alphabet, I learned some phrases before I went. But the program in Russia was very well organized and so we learned a lot there.

Margaret Mullins:

I had taken no Arabic before I left. I knew nothing. Absolutely nothing; had never been to the Middle East. I have absolutely no relatives from the Middle East, they're all in Dublin. I would say that most of it you just really cannot prepare for. I continue to do a lot of work helping students in the YES program and some of the NSLI students going to Egypt and there's coaching you can do in trying to prep people culturally in how it's going to be difficult, but one of the main things that I've tried to stress to students that are going over on the first time is that everyone takes it differently. You will have a completely different experience than I did or that anyone else did or that anyone else in your program will have. I think that the most important thing is to be open as much as you possibly can, to be empathetic with everyone you deal with, to be nice, and respectful to the culture.

Narrator:

Narrator:

In addition to preparing themselves, students going overseas often receive a range of support from family and friends about their decision.

Sarah Runkle:

I'm Sarah Runkle and I'm from New Jersey. I went to Shanghai, in China. I was really excited about it and everyone in my family was really excited about it for me. My mom was kind of a bit more hesitant. She was kind of worried about sending me half way across the world to China, somewhere that no one in my family in my family has ever been and they were really impressed by the orientation program in May, it was a weekend here. The director of my program did this really intensive informational session for the orientation. The orientation was really helpful.

Matt Thorp:

Most of them were pretty happy for me. Like basically the same typical reaction like, ah, that's great, get me something in Russia!

Margaret Mullins:

Well, I got a range of opinions. I remember my family, I have a lot of family from different parts of Georgia and Alabama and Florida and everything and they thought I was totally insane. They thought I was going to get blown up, kidnapped, attacked, join Al-Queda - which was an interesting one. I'm going on a State Department scholarship! My family was initially hesitant but they realized that if someone else was paying for it, then there wasn't really much they could say. My friends really didn't understand why I wanted to leave after my senior year of high school before I was leaving for school and I just got a wide range of opinions. Just kind of disbelief of why anyone would go to Egypt and jump into that.

Matt Petty:

If you go to Russia, you're going to turn communist and you're going to be the devil when you come back, so people gave me grief about that, you know, they always question why would you ever study Russian, it's never going to be useful and so, I didn't take it as discouraging, it could be discouraging for some people. They questioned my judgment of why I would want to go over there and do anything like that because it's so different from my life at home. But, you know, I kept my head up and I had my reasons and so I didn't let that discourage me.

Esmay Devra West:

My name is Esmay Devra West and I'm from Baltimore. I went to Kazan, Russia.

Narrator:

Every student that goes overseas comes back with stories of what it's really like to live in Russia, China, Egypt, or any of the NSLI-Y countries. The first day is always the toughest.

Esmay Devra West:

Obviously I didn't get any sleep on the plane because it was uncomfortable. So I got to Kazan in the morning. I hadn't slept for like the past 24 hours and then I had to meet my host family, and it was really scary because I was really intimidated by being in a place where I don't really speak the language and there are new people and I have to like live with them and make a good impression and everything. I had no idea really what to expect.

Margaret Mullins:

I remember showing up, I was very, very tired, kind of confused, really had no idea what to expect and it was really hot, really crowded, very dusty, and really alive. I remember we landed late at night and we're driving through the city at 2:00 in the morning. You would have thought that it was noon, or rush hour, or something. The streets were full of people, it was gridlock traffic. The city was alive and it was 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning and I remember thinking "I don't know what I'm doing, I just left Georgia, what's going on!" And it was something totally different than anything I had ever experienced.

Narrator:

Before long, the students find that the program offers a routine that they are soon familiar with. The routine and support from the program provides the opportunities to spend time with host families and experience local life.

Esmay Devra West:

After that first day, I had a pretty easy time. Right now, at this point in my life, I'm like looking for more independence so it was kind of exactly what I wanted. Another thing that helped me a lot was that I had a couple people on the trip that I knew from school and so we could act as like a support system for each other, and I made a really good friend there on the trip and she was from America, it wasn't someone that I already knew. Just knowing that I had those two people from my school going into it was a big confidence boost.

Tim Hampshire:

It took me about a third of the time to actually get adjusted. The shopping experience is insane. The first time we went to like a big, like shopping center, I thought it was going to be kind of a mall. It was not a mall. I was like a giant building, and there were sort of corridors throughout this whole building and many floors and just tiny little compartments of like stuff. And you had to go in there. And they'll just grab you. You can't browse in China was one of my most shocking things; you can't browse things. You walk into a place where things are for sale, people will accost you, and grab you, try to convince you to buy things. It was crazy. It took a little while to get used to souvenir buying, because it was hard.

Hoogakker:

I didn't actually stay with a host family the whole time. We stayed at a summer camp Nadezhda, it means "hope" in Russian, I'm not sure what it is in Tajik. We started at the camp actually, and we had short-term home stays of like five days, four days. We had class every day at the camp and we kind of went on excursions.

Matt Thorp:

The person who I had the most contact with was my host mother. She was amazing because she would talk with me whenever I wanted to and she was always there for me. Just communication is just hard to get together and definitely my mom was just so great.

Sarah Runkle:

I know some people kind of think of China as a strict, severe country. I know of course that I didn't get a full picture, but I felt some of the stereotypes people I knew had about China; I kind of broke though those, and I was able to go back and explain to them that, like certain things weren't true.

Narrator:

Some of the recent NSLI-Y program participants shared their thoughts on the best ways to deal with the inevitable challenges we all face when living and studying in a foreign country.

Esmay Devra West:

Whatever they tell you in the pre-departure meeting, I mean they're only going to be able to tell you generalizations. They told us stuff and what we saw was different and I had some experiences

where people were not very happy about talking to be because I was slow or using wrong words and stuff. It's really unnerving to have someone treat you like you're stupid because you don't speak the language. Well, you just have to remember that it's a learning experience. Don't let yourself get down about someone being impatient. They're not the ones going to a foreign country and speaking in a language that's not their first language. So, if they're being mean to you about it, that's just them being rude and you can't let it bother you that much.

Margaret Mullins:

I just got back from a year abroad and I spent half the year in Egypt again and then half the year in Doha, Qatar. I experienced the exact same things. It was my third time in Egypt at this point and even at the end, in December, I was still just getting frustrated with some of the daily things and I think that that's, it just doesn't go away, really. It's a lot of work. I just remember trying to figure out what bus I was trying to get on just to get home and things like that can be just really, really frustrating, but it helped me appreciate Egyptian society; helped me appreciate American society.

Matt Thorp:

Anyone who goes abroad should maintain a positive contact, I mean it might not be their host mother, but just someone who's Russian that they can talk to that only knows Russian. Because then it forces you to communicate and it was really nice.

Narrator:

Coming back to the United States after an extended time in a foreign country is sometimes as challenging as leaving in the first place.

Matt Petty:

Actually coming back, even though it was only seven weeks, it was challenging for me. They gave information about culture shock whenever we came back that the first couple days with your family and friends it's a novelty, you know, how was Russia and everything, but then they don't ask any more. I had really grown a lot in my views around the world and views on my family especially, just because of how the Russian culture views possessions, family, pace of life. Now, two months after, you know, I continue talking with the friends I made in Russia through the internet, but you know my family, friends, it's normal again.

Matt Thorp:

Myself, I really didn't have any homesick issues. I mean, it was really coming back, like the reverse culture shock. Some of my friends got a little upset at me for talking about Russia so much so be wary of that. You can go into so many different stories and like talk about the food and all that stuff. But only you're really going to know what that country is like.

Corinne Hoogakker:

Oh, it was completely worth it. I loved it. The people in Tajikistan are so fabulous. You sit down on the bus and you got to talk to whoever's next to you and it's great. Everyone was so welcoming and I kind of worried because Tajikistan is a Muslim country and you know, that's something that a lot of us aren't used to and I was like, oh no, you know, what am I going to have to cover up my hair everyday, and it was the weirdest mix of cultures I could possibly imagine and I feel like I got

exposed to so much that you would never ever come across here. I really don't know what I want to do, but I know that I want to go abroad a whole lot more.

Narrator:

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